

Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah

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AL-FĀTIHAH

(The Opening)

This Sūrah is Makkan, and comprises of seven verses

The Merits and Peculiarities of the Sūrah

This Sūrah (Chapter) of the Holy Qur'ān possesses a number of merits peculiar to it. Firstly, the Holy Qur'ān begins with it; the prescribed prayer begins with it; and even in the order of revelation this is the first Surah which was revealed to the Holy Prophet ﷺ in its complete form. Some verses of the Sūrahs Iqra' (al-'Alaq), al-Muzzammil and al-Muddaththir had no doubt been revealed earlier, but the first Sūrah to be revealed in a complete form is no other than this. Certain Companions of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم have reported that this was the first Sūrah to be revealed. Most probably they had meant that no Sūrah had been revealed in a complete form before this. Perhaps that is why the Sūrah has been named as '*Fātihatul-Kitāb*' (The Opening of the Book).

The other important peculiarity of the Sūrah is that it is, so to say, the quintessence of the Holy Qur'ān, and the rest of the Qur'ān is its elaboration. The Sūrah may thus be delineated for two reasons. Firstly, all that the Holy Qur'ān has to say is, in one way or another, related to either of the two themes, faith (*Īmān*) and virtuous deeds (*al-'amal al-salih*), and the basic principles of the two have been

indicated in this Sūrah (See Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī and Rūḥ al-Bayān). That is why authentic Traditions (*Aḥādīth*) give to this Sūrah such titles as "*Umm al-Qur'ān*" (Essence of the Qur'ān), "*Umm al-Kitāb*" (Essence of the Book), "*Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*" (Glorious Qur'ān).

Secondly, this Sūrah gives a special instruction to the man who begins the recitation or the study of the Qur'ān – that he should approach this book with a mind cleansed of all his previous thoughts and opinions, seeking nothing but the Truth and the right path, praying to Allah for being guided in the right path. The Sūrah begins with the praise of Him before whom the request is to be submitted, and ends with the request for guidance. The whole of the Qur'ān is the answer to this request. The answer begins with the words: "*Alif Lām Mīm*. This is the Book", which is an indication that the guidance man had prayed for has been provided in this Book.

The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has said, "I swear by Allah who is the master of my life, neither the Torah, nor the Evangile nor the Psalms of David have anything to compare with the Opening Chapter of the Qur'ān, and no other Chapter of the Qur'ān itself can compare with it." (Reported by the Companion Abū Hurairah رضى الله عنه).

The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has also said that this Sūrah is a cure for all kinds of illnesses. According to another Tradition (*Ḥadīth*), the Sūrah has also been named the "Cure" (*Al-Shifā*), (See Qurtūbī), and al-Bukhārī reports from the Companion Anas that the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has called this Sūrah the greatest among all the Sūrahs of the Holy Qur'ān. (See Qurtūbī)

﴿بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ﴾

(I begin) with the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful.

***Bismillāh* is a verse of the Holy Qur'ān**

There is consensus of all the Muslims on the fact that *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* is a verse of the Holy Qur'ān, being a part of the Sūrah al-Naml (The Ant); and there is also an agreement on that this

verse is written at the head of every Sūrah except the Sūrah al-Taubah. But there is a difference of opinion among the *Mujtāhids* (the authentic scholars who are entitled to express an opinion in such matters) as to whether this verse is an integral part of the Sūrah al-Fatihah or of all the Sūrahs or not. According to the great Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, it is not an integral part of any Sūrah except al-Naml, rather it is in itself an independent verse of the Holy Qur'ān which has been revealed for being placed at the beginning of every Surah in order to separate and distinguish one Sūrah from another.

The merits of *Bismillāh*

It was a custom in the Age of Ignorance (*Jāhiliyyah*) before the advent of Islam that people began everything they did with the names of their idols or gods. It was to eradicate this practice that the first verse of the Holy Qur'ān which the Archangel Jibrā'il brought down to the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم commanded him to begin the Qur'ān with the name of Allah **اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ**: "Read with the name of your Lord."

The famous commentator al-Suyuti says that beside the Holy Qur'ān all the other divine books too begin with *Bismillāh*. Certain other scholars are of the opinion that *Bismillāh Al-Raḥmān Al-Raḥīm* is peculiar to the Qur'ān and to the followers of Muḥammad ﷺ. The two views can be brought into agreement with each other if we say that all the divine books share the common trait of beginning with the name of Allah, but the words *Bismillāh Al-Raḥmān Al-Raḥīm* are peculiar to the Holy Qur'ān, as is evident from certain Traditions (*Aḥādīth*) which report that in order to begin with the name of Allah anything he undertook, the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم used to say the words **بِسْمِكَ اللَّهُمَّ** (*Bismikā Allāhumma*), but when the verse *Bismillah Al-Raḥman Al-Raḥim* was revealed, he adopted these words. Since then this practice was established through the verbal command of the Holy Prophet ﷺ or through his act or tacit approval). (See Qurṭubī and Rūh al-Ma'ānī)

The Holy Qur'ān again and again instructs us to begin what we do with the name of Allah. The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has said that no important work receives the blessings of Allah, unless it is begun

with His name. According to yet another *ḥadīth* (Tradition), closing the door of one's house, putting out the lamp, covering a vessel, should all be done with the recitation of *Bismillāh*. The Holy Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth* (Traditions) repeatedly instruct us to recite this verse while taking food, drinking water, performing the *wudū* (ablution), getting on a carriage or getting down from it. (See *Qurtubī*)

By instructing man to begin everything with the name of Allah, Islam has given to the whole of his life an orientation towards Allah so that he may, with each step he takes, renew his allegiance to the covenant with Allah that nothing he does, not even his very being can come into existence without the will and the help of Allah. Thus, all the economic and worldly activities of man, each movement and gesture becomes transformed into an act of worship.¹ How brief is the action, which consumes neither time nor energy, and yet how immense is the gain -- it is a regular alchemy, transmuting the profane (*dunyā*) into the sacred (*dīn*); a disbeliever eats and drinks just as a Muslim does but in saying '*Bismillāh*' as he begins to eat, the Muslim affirms that it was not in his power to obtain this little morsel of food which has passed through innumerable stages from the sowing of the seed to the reaping of the grain corn, and which has during this process required the labours of the wind, the rain, the sun, of the heavens and of the earth, and of a thousand men -- and that it is Allah alone who has granted him this morsel of food or this draught of water by making it go through all these stages. A disbeliever goes to sleep, wakes up and goes about as much as a Muslim. But while going to sleep or waking up, the Muslim mentions the name of Allah, renewing his relationship with Him. Thus his economic and worldly needs and activities acquire the nature of the remembrance of Allah, and are counted as acts of worship. Similarly, in saying '*Bismillāh*' while getting on to a carriage, the Muslim testifies to the fact that it is beyond the power of man to produce this carriage and to procure it for him, and that it is only the infallible and divinely-created order of

1. This is the only way in which human life can, to use a word dear to modern cultural anthropology, be sacralized in any meaningful sense of the term -- Translator

things that has brought together from all the corners of the world the wood, the steel and other metals which have gone into the making of the carriage, as well as the mechanics who have given a particular shape to these components, and the driver -- and finally put all these into the service of man who can make use of the labour of this army of the creatures of man who can God by spending a few coins. And even these coins have not been created by him, it is Allah himself who has provided the complex ways and means of earning them. Veritably, '*Bismillāh*' is the legendary philosopher's stone which transmutes, not copper, but mere dust into the purest of gold. **فَلِلّٰهِ الْحَمْدُ عَلَىٰ دِينِ الْاِسْلَامِ وَتَعْلِيْقَاتِهِ** : 'So then, praised be Allah for the religion of Islam and its teachings.'

Ruling

'Before beginning to recite the Qur'ān, it is *sunnah* to first say **أَعُوْذُ بِاللّٰهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيْمِ** (I seek refuge with Allah from Satan -- the accursed) and then **بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ** (I begin with the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful). And during the *tilāwah* (the recitation of the Holy Qur'ān) as well, saying **بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ** : '*Bismillah*... at the beginning of each Sūrah, except the Sūrah Al-Bara'ah (al-Taūbah), is *Sunnah*.

Commentary

'*Bismillāh*': This phrase is composed of three words -- the letter '*Bā*', '*Ism*' and 'Allah'. The preposition '*Ba*' has several connotations in Arabic, three of which are appropriate to the occasion. All the three are applicable here: (1) Contiguity, or the close proximity between one thing and the other; (2) Seeking the aid of someone or something; (3) To seek the blessings of someone.

The word '*Ism*' has many lexical and intellectual nuances of meaning, the knowledge of which would not be essential for the average reader. It is sufficient to know that this word is translated in English as 'Name'.

The word, 'Allah' is the greatest and the most comprehensive of the divine names. According to some scholars, it is the 'Great Name', or '*Al-Ism al-Ā'zam*'. (According to the Tradition (*Ḥadīth*), the Great Name carries with it such a benediction that a prayer is granted when this word has been uttered. Reports differ as to what this Great Name

is). The word 'Allah' refers to the Essence, and hence this name cannot be given to anyone except Allah. That is why this word has neither a plural nor a dual, for Allah is One and has no associate. In short, Allah is the name of that Ultimate Reality which comprehends in Itself all the attributes of perfection, which is the creator and sustainer, unique and peerless.

Thus, the phrase '*Bismillāh*' has these three respective significations according to the three connotations of the preposition '*Ba*':

- (a) With the name of Allah
- (b) With the help of the name of Allah
- (c) With the *barakah* or benediction of the name of Allah.

But, in all the three forms, the phrase obviously remains incomplete unless one mentions the work which one intends to begin with the name of Allah or with its help or benediction. So, according to the rules of grammar, some verb is taken to be understood here which should be suitable for the occasion -- e.g., 'I begin or recite with the name of Allah.' Propriety demands that even this verb should be understood to occur after the phrase, so that one does actually begin with the name of Allah and the verb does not precede His name. The preposition '*Bā*' has, however, to be placed before the name of Allah, for it is an exigency of the Arabic language. But even in this respect the 'Uthmāni manuscript of the Holy Qur'an prepared by the third Caliph 'Uthmān رضى الله عنه has made the necessary modification in accordance with the consensus of the Companions of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. The regular Arabic script requires the letter '*Bā*' here to be joined with the letter '*Alif*', producing this shape -- بِاسْمِ اللَّهِ. But the 'Uthmani manuscript has dropped the '*Alif*', and joined the letter '*Bā*' with the letter '*Sīn*', making the '*Bā*' look like a part of the word '*Ism*', so that the beginning is made, in effect, with the name of Allah. That is why the letter '*Alif*' is not dropped in other combinations between the preposition '*Bā*' and the noun '*Ism*' -- for example, in the verse اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ (Iqrā' biismi Rabbik), the '*Alif*' is written along with the '*Bā*'. It is the peculiarity of '*Bismillāh*' alone that the letter '*Ba*' has been joined with the letter '*Sin*'.

Merciful) -- these two are the attributes of Allah Almighty. '*Raḥmān*' signifies one whose mercy is common to all, and extends to the whole universe, to everything that will be created in the future. On the other hand, '*Raḥīm*' signifies one whose mercy is perfect in all possible ways. That is why '*Raḥmān*' is the exclusive attribute of Allah and the word is employed only when one is referring to Him. It is not permissible to qualify any created being as '*Raḥmān*', for there cannot possibly be anyone else, beside Allah, whose mercy should be all-embracing and all-inclusive. Just like the word 'Allah', there is no dual or plural for the word '*Raḥmān*' too, because these words are in their signification exclusive to the One and Absolute Being which does not permit the existence of a second or a third. (Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī) The signification of the word '*Rahim*', on the contrary, does not contain anything which it should be impossible to find in a created being, for a man may be perfectly merciful in his dealings with another man. So, the word '*Rahim*' may justifiably be employed in the case of a human being -- as the Qur'ān itself has used the word in speaking of the Holy Prophet ﷺ which is: بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَؤُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ (He is gentle and very merciful towards the Muslims).

Ruling: This would easily show that those who shorten names such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān or Fadl al-Rahman into '*Raḥmān*' are doing what is not permissible and are thus committing a sin.

Out of the 'Beautiful Names' (الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى : *Al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) of Allah Almighty and His attributes of perfection, only two have been mentioned in this verse - namely, '*al-Raḥmān*' and '*al-Raḥīm*' -, and both have been derived from the root '*Rahmah*' (mercy), indicating the all-pervasiveness and perfection of divine mercy. It points to the fact that the creation of the heavens and the earth and the sustenance of the whole universe has no other motivation than making manifest Allah's quality of mercy. He Himself had no need of these things, nor could anyone compel Him to create them. It is His own mercy which has required the creation and sustenance of the whole universal order.

How aptly this was put in Persian by poet *Rūmī*:

مانبودیم و تقاضا ما نبود
لطف تو ناگفته مامی شنود

There was nothing -- neither our being nor our claim to be;
It was Thy mercy that heard our unsaid.

Injunctions and related considerations

The Holy Qur'an says: **فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ**: 'When you recite the Qur'an, seek the protection of Allah against Satan, the rejected one'.

According to the consensus of *Ummah*, it is a *Sunnah* to say *ta'awwudh*: **أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ** 'before the recitation of the Holy Qur'an whether in *Salāh* or out of *Salāh* (*Sharah al-munyah*). Saying *ta'awwudh* is peculiar to the recitation of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, with the exception of *tilawah*, all other chores should be taken up by first saying '*Bismillāh*' only. Saying *ta'awwudh* is not a *sunnah* there. (Alamgiri, Chapter 4 - Al-Karahiyah)

One should begin the recitation of the Qur'an by reciting both **أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ** (I seek the protection of Allah) and **بِسْمِ اللَّهِ** (*Bismillāhi*: I begin with the name of Allah). During the recitation, one should repeat '*Bismillāh*', but not '*A'udhubillāh*', when one comes to the end of a *Sūrah* (or Chapter) and begins the next *Sūrah* -- with the sole exception of the *Sūrah* 'Al-Bara'ah' (**الْبَرَاءَةُ**). If one comes upon this particular *Sūrah* in the course of the recitation, one should not say '*Bismillāh*' before reading it. But if one happens to begin the recitation of the Holy Qur'an with this *Sūrah*, one should recite '*A'udhubillāh*' and '*Bismillāh*' both (Alamgiri from Al-Muḥīṭ).

'*Bismillāh al-Rahmān al-Rahim*' is a verse of the Holy Qur'an and a part of the verse in *Sūrah* 'al-Naml'; it is also a regular verse when it occurs between two *Sūrahs*. It must, therefore, be treated with as much respect as the Holy Qur'an itself, and it is not permissible to touch it without having performed *wudu* (ablution). In the state of major ritual impurity (e.g., after the emission of semen, or during menstruation, or after child-birth), it is not allowed to even read this verse as recitation of the Holy Qur'an before having taken a ritual bath. One may, however, recite it as a form of prayer before beginning a work, like taking one's meals or drinking water under all conditions.

Rulings:

(1) It is a *Sunnah* to recite '*Bismillāh*' after '*A'udhū-billāh*' at the very beginning of the first *raka'ah* in the *salāh*. But views differ as to whether it should be recited in a loud or a low voice. Īmām Abū

Hanifah and certain other Imāms prefer it to be done in a low voice. There is a consensus on the point that '*Bismillāh*' should be recited at the beginning of all the succeeding *raka'ahs* too. This is unanimously considered to be a *Sunnah*; however, in some narrations, the reciting of '*Bismillāh*' at the beginning of every *raka'ah* has been identified as *wajib* or necessary.

(2) In the course of *salāh*, whether one is reciting the Holy Qur'ān loudly or silently, one should not recite '*Bismillāh*' before beginning a Sūrah just after the Sūrah 'Fatihah'. Such a practice has not been reported either from the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم or from any of the first four *Khulafā'*. According to *Sharh al-munyah*, this is the view of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah and of Imām Abu Yusuf, and *Shrah al-munyah*, al-Durr al-Mukhtar, al-Burhan etc. prefer it to other views. But Imām Muḥammad considers it to be preferable that one should recite '*Bismillah*' if one is reciting the Holy Qur'an in a *salāh* offered silently. Certain reports attribute this view even to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, and al-Shāmi has quoted some Muslim jurists in support of this view, -- which has been adopted even in 'Bahishti Zewar' of Maulanā Thānavi. Anyhow, there is a complete agreement among the scholars that it is not *makrūh* or reprehensible for some one to recite '*Bismillāh*' in this situation.



SURAH AL - FATIHAH

(The Opening)

MAKKAN

VERSES: 7

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ۝

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ۝ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ۝ مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ ۝
 إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ۝ اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ۝
 صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۝ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا
 الضَّالِّينَ ۝

**With the name of Allah,
the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful.**

Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds, the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we worship, and from You alone we seek help. Guide us in the straight path -- the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.

This Sūrah comprises seven verses. Of these, the first three are in praise of Allah, while the last three contain a request or a prayer on the part of man, which Allah himself has, in His infinite mercy, taught him. The verse in between the two sets has both the features -- there is an aspect of praise, and another of prayer.

The Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim reports from the blessed Companion Abū Hurayrah a ḥadīth (Tradition) of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم : "Allah has said, 'The *salāh* (i.e., the Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah) is equally

divided between Me and My servant. And My servant shall be given what he prays for." The Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم continued: "When the servant says:

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds,

Allah says: "My servant has paid his homage to Me." When he says:

الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

The All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful,

Allah says: "My servant has praised Me." When the servant says:

مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

The Master of the Day of Judgment,

Allah says, "My servant has proclaimed my greatness." When the servant says:

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help,

Allah says, "This verse is common to Me and My servant. He shall be given what he has prayed for." When the servant says:

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

Guide us in the straight path...,

Allah says: "All this is there for My servant. He shall be given what he prays for." (Mazhari)

The Sūrah begins with the words *Al-hamdulillāh*, signifying that all praise essentially belongs to Allah. Whosoever praises anything anywhere in the world is ultimately praising Allah. The sensible world contains millions of things which compel man's attention and admiration for their beauty and usefulness, but if one tries to look behind the veil of appearances, one would find in each and every thing the manifestation of the same creative power. Admiring anything that exists in the created world is no more than showing one's admiration

for a work of art or craft, which in fact is a praise of the artist or the craftsman. This small statement of the Holy Qur'ān opens a new perspective for man lost in the labyrinth of multiplicity, and shows him how the many are knit together in the same unity, and how all praise in reality belongs to One whose power is absolute, and that it is only in our ignorance or indifference that we regard this praise to be due to anyone else.

If there is only one Being in the whole universe who inherently deserves all praise, it necessarily follows from it that this Being alone should be worthy of adoration and worship. Thus we can see that although the phrase, *Al-hamdulillāh*, has been used to signify praise, yet, by implication, it cuts the very root of polytheism or the worship of created beings, and at the same time brings out in a self-evident manner the first and the basic principle of the Islamic creed -- Oneness of God.

The next phrase to follow in the Sūrah speaks of an attribute of Allah -- Lord of the Worlds. Lexically, the word, *Rabb* signifies 'one who nurtures'. And 'nurture' implies developing a thing by gradual stages in a manner which is conducive to its own good till it attains perfection. The word, *Rabb* is exclusive to the sacred Being of Allah, and cannot be employed in the case of any created being without adding some qualification, for a created being is itself in need of 'nurture', and cannot nurture anyone else.

Al-'alāmin is the plural of *'alam* (world, universe, kingdom). "The worlds" include all possible forms of -- existence: the sky, the earth, the sun, the moon, stars, wind and rain, the angels, the jinns, animals, plants, minerals, and, of course, men. So, 'the Lord of all the worlds' means that Allah alone gives nurture to all the forms of existents that are to be found in this universe, or in the millions of universes that may lie beyond our own universe in the outer space. Imām Rāzī, the great commentator of the Holy Qur'ān, says that the existence of an indefinite space beyond our universe can be proved on the basis of rational argument, and it is also certain that Allah is All-Powerful, so it should not be at all difficult for Him to have created millions of other universes in this endless space. It has been reported from the Companion Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī رضي الله عنه that there are forty thousand

worlds; our world, stretching from the East to the West, is only one of them, there being many more besides it. According to the well-known commentator *Muqatil*, the number of worlds is eighty thousand. (See Qurtubi)

As for the objection that no man or animal can live in the outer space owing to the lack of the kind of air which should be compatible with the physical make-up of man, Imām Rāzī replies that the inhabitants of the worlds in the outer space need not necessarily have the same physical make-up as that of the inhabitants of our world which should make existence in space impossible for them, and suggests that their organic composition and the requirements for its nourishment and sustenance might just be totally different.

Imām Rāzī postulated these possibilities some eight hundred years ago without the help of the modern facilities for observation and exploration, yet the speculations of the scientists in the age of space travel endorse his view.

Seen in the light of this short phrase, 'Lord of the worlds', the universe reveals itself to be an incredibly complex, yet perfectly integrated order. From the heavens to the earth, from the planets and the stars to the particles of dust, everything is bound in a chain of being, and is performing the function assigned to it by Divine Wisdom. Man cannot obtain a little morsel of food unless a thousand forces of the sky and the earth work together to produce it. The universal order is there for man to contemplate, and to realize that, if Allah has put millions of His creatures in the service of man, man in his turn cannot be worthless or purposeless or meaningless.² The Holy Qur'ān is indeed very explicit and very insistent in reminding us that the universe is not absurd:

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا بَاطِلًا ذَلِكَ ظَنُّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَوَيْلٌ
لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنَ النَّارِ

We have not created in vain the heavens and the earth and what lies between them. That is the fancy of the disbelievers. But woe to the disbelievers in the fire of Hell. (38:27)

2. As do proclaim the current Western philosophies of the Absurd and of Unreason.

If the universe is not in vain or absurd, man too, whose purposes the universe has been made to serve, cannot be purposeless and meaningless. The Holy Qur'ān defines the Divine purpose in creating man and the goal of his existence in these words.

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

I have not created the jinn and mankind except to worship Me. (51:56)

It may be said that the phrase 'the Lord of all the worlds' is in a way the proof of the claim made in the earlier phrase الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ : (all praise belongs to Allah). When Allah alone is the ultimate cause for the nurture of the whole universe, He alone can, in reality, be worthy of praise. Thus, the first verse of the Surah, as we said before, combines in itself the praise of Allah and a subtle indication of the first and basic principle of the Islamic creed -- the oneness of God.

The second verse speaks of the Divine quality of mercy, employing two adjectives *Rahmān* and *Rahīm*, both of which are hyperbolic terms in Arabic, and respectively connote the superabundance and perfection of Divine mercy. The reference to this particular attribute in this situation is perhaps intended to be a reminder of the fact that it is not through any external compulsion or inner need or any kind of necessity whatsoever that Allah has assumed the responsibility of nurturing the whole of His creation, but in response to the demand of His own quality of mercy. If this whole universe did not exist, He would suffer no loss; if it does exist, it is no burden to Him.

The third verse pays homage to Allah as 'the Master of the Day of Judgment or Requitāl': مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ. The word *Mālik* has been derived from the root, '*mil*k' (ملك) which signifies possessing a thing in such a manner that one has the right and power to dispose of it as one likes (See Qamus). The word *Dīn* signifies 'Requitāl'. So, the phrase 'Master of the Day of Requitāl' implies total mastery on the Day of Requitāl. But there is no mention of the thing or things to which this mastery or possession would apply. According to the commentary, '*al-Kashshaf*', the phrase makes a general reference to cover everything. That is to say, on the Day of Requitāl the mastery over everything that exists will belong to Allah alone.

The Day of Requit is real and rational:

Before we proceed, let us consider two important questions: Firstly, what is this Day of Requit? Secondly, Allah being the Master, of everything even today as much as on the Day of Requit, why does this verse specifically mention the Day of Requit? The Day of Requit or the Day of Judgment is the Day appointed by Allah to recompense good or evil deeds.³ The world is only the field of action, the place where one is required to perform one's duty, and not the place for receiving one's reward. The mere fact that man happens to be healthy and wealthy or powerful does not necessarily argue that he has won the pleasure and favour of Allah. Similarly, the mere fact that a man happens to be ill or poor or weak or miserable does not by itself indicate that he is the object of Allah's wrath. Even in the case of worldly life, would it not be a platitude to remark that a man sweating in a factory or an office does not consider it a misfortune? In fact, try to deprive him of this opportunity to sweat, and you would have earned his deepest displeasure; for beyond all this toil he can glimpse the reward he is going to get after thirty days in the shape of his wages.

It proceeds from this principle that the greatest sufferings in this world are the lot of the Prophets عليهم السلام and, after them, of the men of Allah, and yet we see them quite content and even happy. In short, physical well-being or worldly glory or luxury is no sure indication of one's virtue and truthfulness, nor is sorrow and suffering that of one's misdeeds and falsity. It may, however, happen that a man receives some punishment or reward for his deeds in this world. This never is the full recompense, but only a faint model which has been manifested to serve as an intimation or warning. The Holy Qur'an has spoken very clearly on this point:

وَلَنَذِيقَنَّهُمْ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ الْأَدْنَىٰ دُونَ الْعَذَابِ الْأَكْبَرِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

And We shall surely let them taste a nearer punishment (in

3. The verse qualifies Allah specifically as 'Master of the Day of Requit', and thus emphasizes a principle which is in itself of the highest import, and is particularly relevant to certain tendencies in the modern habits of thought. Contrary to the modern conviction which one finds reflected even in the so called "new interpretations" of Islam, individual or collective well being is not the be-all and end-all of human existence, nor is the physical world the place where good or evil deeds are recompensed -- Translator

this world) before the greater punishment (in the other world), so that they may return (to the right path). (32:21)

كَذَٰلِكَ الْعَذَابُ وَالْعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةُ أَكْبَرُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ

Such is the punishment; and the punishment of the other world is certainly greater, only if they knew. (68 : 33)

The sufferings of this world, as even its joys, are sometimes a trial, and sometimes a punishment, but never a full recompense, for the world is itself transitory. What really counts is the joy or suffering that will endure for ever, and which one will come to know in the other world beyond this world. Given the fact that good or evil deeds are not fully recompensed in this world, and the rational and just principle that good and evil not being equal in value, every deed should be rewarded or punished according to its nature, it readily follows that beyond this world there should be another world where every deed, big or small, good or evil, is to be judged, and then justly rewarded or punished. This the Holy Qur'an calls *Al-Akhirah*: الآخرة (The world-to-come), or *Al-Qiyamah*: القيامة (Doomsday or the Day of Judgment), or *'Yawm al-din*, (Day of Requital). The whole idea has been explained by the Holy Qur'an itself:

مَا يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَىٰ وَالْبَصِيرُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَلَا الْمُسِيءُ قَلِيلًا
مَّا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ۚ إِنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَأَتِيَةٌ لَّأَرْيَبَ فِيهَا، وَلَكِنَّا كَثُرَ النَّاسُ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ۝

The blind are not equal with the seeing, nor the wrong-doers with those who believe and do good deeds. Yet you seldom reflect. The hour of retribution is sure to come, no doubt about it, yet most people do not believe. (40 : 58-59)

Who is the Master ?

Now, we come to the second question. It should be obvious, on a little reflection, to everyone that the real master of every particle of dust in the universe can only be He who has created and nurtured it, Whose mastery over everything is complete, having neither a beginning nor an end, covering the living and the dead, the apparent and the hidden, the seen and the unseen. On the contrary, the mastery of man is delimited by a beginning and an end; it has a 'before' when it did not exist, and an 'after' when it will exist no more. Man's mastery and control extends to the living, not to the dead, to the seen, not to

the unseen, to the external aspect of things, not to the internal. All this would show to those who can see that the real Master of the whole universe, not only on the Day of Requitul but even in this world, is no other than Allah. Then why should this verse specify the Day of Requitul ?

The verses of the Sūrah al-Mū'min / Ghafīr (Chapter 40) serve as a commentary on the phrase under discussion, and provide a clear account of the Day of Requitul. The real and complete mastery over everything, no doubt, belongs to Allah alone even in this world. Yet Allah Himself, in His beneficence and wisdom, has granted a kind of imperfect, temporary and apparent mastery to man as well; and the *Shari'ah*, in laying down laws for worldly affairs, has given due consideration to man's limited right to ownership. But today, in possessing lands or money or power, which has been given to him by way of trial, man has always been prone to get drunk with pride and vanity.⁴ The phrase 'Master of the Day of Judgment' is a warning to man reeling in his forgetfulness and self-conceit, and an intimation that all his possessions, all his relationships with things and men are only short-lived, and that there shall come a Day when masters will no more be masters and slaves no more slaves, when no one will own anything even in appearance, and the ownership and mastery, apparent as well as real, of the whole universe will be seen to belong to none but Allah, the Exalted. The Holy Qur'an says:

يَوْمَ هُمْ بَارِزُونَ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَيْءٌ لِّمَنِ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ
الْقَهَّارِ الْيَوْمَ يُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ لَا ظُلْمَ الْيَوْمَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

The day they will present themselves (before Allah), and nothing of theirs will remain hidden from Allah (even apparently). 'Whose is the kingdom today?' Of Allah alone, the One, the Mighty. Today everyone will be recompensed for what he has done. Today no one will be wronged. Allah's reckoning is surely swift. (40:17)

The fourth verse اِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَ اِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ : 'You alone we worship, and from You alone we seek help' has a double aspect, one of praise and

4. Specially the modern man living in the so-called 'humanistic civilization' when the sole drive and motivating force is the complacent belief in man's mastery.

another of prayer. A man's life is subject to three states of time -- past, present and future.

The first two verses of the Sūrah, اَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ (All Praise belongs to Allah) and اَلرَّحْمٰنُ الرَّحِيْمُ (the All-Merciful, the Very-Merciful), remind man that, as far as his past and present are concerned, he owes everything to Allah alone, for it is Allah who created him out of nothing, endowed him with the best form in the universe, and with reason and intuition, and continues to sustain and nurture him in the present. The third verse: مٰلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ (Master of the Day of Judgment) tells him that in the future too he will have to depend on Allah alone, for on the Day of Requital one cannot possibly have a helper other than Allah. The three verses having made it clear that man is totally and absolutely dependent on Allah in all the three states of his life, it logically and naturally leads to the conclusion that Allah alone is worthy of being worshipped, for in Arabic the word *'ibādah* (worship) connotes showing the utmost humility and submissiveness out of an intense respect and love for someone, and such an attitude of willing self-abasement cannot justly be adopted towards anyone except Allah. So, the phrase: اِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ (You alone we worship) expresses this very natural and logical conclusion. And once it has been understood that there is only one Being who can satisfy all our needs, it is equally natural and logical to turn for help in everything to Him alone. Hence the phrase اِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِيْظُ (to You alone we pray for help). Beside these two aspects, the fourth verse has another dimension as well. It teaches man not to worship anyone except Allah, not to consider anyone else as being really capable of satisfying his needs, and not to beg anyone else to satisfy these needs. It does not, however, go against this principle if, in praying to Allah, one mentions the name of a prophet or a man of Allah by way of a medium (*wasilāh*) for drawing the mercy of Allah upon oneself.

It may also be noticed that the phrase: اِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِيْظُ (to You alone we pray for help) does not mention the purpose for which help is being sought. According to most of the commentators, it generalizes the idea of the request to cover everything from acts of worship to all possible worldly or other-worldly concerns.

Then, acts of worship (*'Ibādah*) are not limited merely to prescribed prayers or fasting. Imām al-Ghāzzālī in his book 'Arba'in' has enumerated ten forms which worship can take:-

1. Prayers.
2. Prescribed Alms-giving.
3. Fasting.
4. Hajj or pilgrimage to Makkah.
5. Reciting the Holy Qur'an.
6. Remembrance of Allah in all possible situations.
7. Earning one's livelihood in accordance with the regulations of the *Shari'ah*.
8. Fulfilling one's obligations towards one's companions and neighbours.
9. Persuading people to act righteously and dissuading them from what is reprehensible and forbidden.
10. To follow the *Sunnah*, or the practice of the Holy Prophet ﷺ.

Therefore, not associating anyone with Allah in worship means that one should not love or fear or depend on anyone else as one loves or fears or depends on Allah, nor should one repose one's hope in anyone else, nor should one consider obedience or submission or service to another as obligatory as the worship of Allah, nor make a votive offering or consecrate or dedicate anything to anyone or take a vow in the name of anyone similar to the way one does these things in the case of Allah, nor should one show complete self-abasement and total humility before anyone as one is required to do before Allah, nor should one engage in the particular God-oriented acts of worship for anyone other than Allah, acts which symbolize the farthest limits of self-abasement, such as, *ruku'* and *sajdah* (the bowing and prostrating in *salāh*).

The Prayer for Guidance

The last three verses of the *Sūrah* consist of a prayer on the part of man. In other words, Allah Himself, in His great mercy, has taught man what to pray for:

إِهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ۝ صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۝ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ۝

Guide us in the straight path, the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.

The Implications of Guidance

A problem of highest significance arises here. The teaching with regard to the prayer for being guided in the straight path is addressed equally to all men or all Muslims and to saints and prophets who have already received guidance and are even a source of guidance for other men. Why should these repeatedly pray for something they already possess? The answer to this question depends on knowing all that is implied by guidance. The answer would, at the same time, remove all difficulties and confusions which arise in the minds of those who, not being familiar with the true signification of guidance, begin to suspect that certain verses of the Holy Qur'ān were contradicting certain others.

The Meaning of *Hidāyah* or Guidance

The best explanation of the word, *Hidāyah* (guidance) has been offered by Imām Raghīb al-Isfahānī in his Mufradat al-Qur'ān, which can be summed up thus: *Hidayah* signifies leading someone towards his destination, gently and kindly; while guidance, in the real sense, issues forth from Allah alone, and it has several degrees.

The First Degree of Guidance

The first degree of guidance is general, and covers everything that exists in the universe -- minerals, plants, animals etc. It would surprise many to hear of guidance in relation to minerals. But the Holy Qur'ān makes it quite clear that all forms of existents in the universe, and every particle of dust possesses life, sensitivity, and even consciousness and understanding in its own degree and according to its own sphere of existence. Some of these existents possess more of this essence than others, and some less. Hence, those who have very little of it are considered to be inanimate and devoid of consciousness. The *Shari'ah* too has recognized this difference, and such creatures have not been made to bear the obligation of observing the injunctions of Allah. The creatures which show obvious signs of life but not those of consciousness and reason are considered to be living, but not rational; whereas, creatures showing the signs of consciousness and reason, along with those of life, are called rational beings. Because of these differences in the degrees of consciousness, men and jinn alone, of all the existents in the universe, have been made subservient to the

injunctions of the *Shari'ah* and accountable for their actions, for they alone have the necessary consciousness and understanding. But, it does not mean that other creatures or existents are totally devoid of life or sensitivity, or of consciousness and understanding. The Holy Qur'an is very explicit on this point:

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يَسْبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ

Nothing exists that does not celebrate His praise, but you do not understand their (mode of) praising. (17:44)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَسْبِّحُ لَهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرِ طَفَيْتِ كُلُّ قَدْ عَلِمَ صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا يَفْعَلُونَ ۝

Have you not seen that everything in the heavens and the earth proclaims Allah's purity, and the birds too that spread their wings? Each of them knows its prayer and its (mode of) praising. And Allah is aware of what they do. (24:41)

Evidently, one cannot extol and praise Allah without knowing Allah. It is equally evident that knowing Allah is the highest form of knowledge possible, and such a knowledge cannot be gained unless one possesses consciousness and understanding. These verses, therefore, show that everything that exists in the universe possesses life, sensitivity, understanding and consciousness, though it may not always be apparent to the ordinary observer -- a truth which has been endorsed by all the great religions, by certain ancient philosophers, and lately even by experimental science.

This, then, is the first degree of guidance which is common to minerals, plants, animals, men, jinns and all the forms of creation. The Holy Qur'an speaks of this primary and general guidance in these words:

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

He gave to everything its distinctive form, and then guided it. (20:50)

Or, as we find in another Surah:

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى ۝ الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسُوَّى ۝ وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى ۝

Celebrate the name of your Lord, the Most High, Who has

created all things, well proportioned them, and Who has determined and guided them. (87:1-2)

That is to say, Allah has given every creature a particular nature and function, and guided it in a way which should correspond to its station in the scheme of things. Thanks to this general guidance, everything in the universe is performing its allotted function with such marvellous efficiency. For example, it is the ears that hear a sound and not the eyes or the nose. Similarly, the nose smells but cannot see; the eyes see but cannot smell. In short:

إِنْ كُلُّ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا آتَى الرَّحْمَنِ عَبْدًا ۝

There is nothing in the heavens and the earth but comes to the All-Merciful as a servant. (19:93)

The Second Degree of Guidance

Unlike the first, the second degree of guidance is not general but particular. It is limited to those creatures which are considered to be rational, that is, men and jinns. This kind of guidance comes to every man through prophets and revealed books. Some accept this guidance, and become believers (*Muslims*): some reject it and become disbelievers (*Kāfirs*).

The Third Degree of guidance

The third degree of guidance is still more particular, being special to true believers (*Mu'minīn*) and the God-fearing (*Muttaqīn*). Like the first degree, the third kind of guidance too descends directly to the individual from Allah, and it is called, *Tawfīq*. That is to say, Allah's grace provides a man with internal and external means and circumstances which should make it easy, and even pleasant for him to accept and act upon the guidance of the Holy Qur'ān, and difficult to ignore or oppose it. The scope of the third degree of guidance is limitless, and its levels indefinite.⁵ Here is the sphere in which man, not only can, but is required to make a progress in the veritable sense of the term. The agency of this progress is the performance of virtuous

5. Contrary to all the modern fictions about man's Evolution or Perfectibility or Progress which may pass for sound philosophy or science.

deeds⁶. All increase in virtuous deeds brings with it an increase in divine guidance. The Holy Qur'an itself gives us the promise of such increase:

وَالَّذِينَ اهْتَدَوْا زَادَهُمْ هُدًى

As for those who follow the straight path, Allah will increase their guidance. (47:17)

وَمَنْ يُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ يَهْدِ قَلْبَهُ

And whoever believes in Allah, He guides his heart. (64:11)

الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا

Those who strive for (literally, 'in') Us, We will surely guide them in Our paths. (29:69)

It is in this field of progress that we see even the greatest prophets and men of Allah striving, and it is an increase in divine guidance and help that they keep seeking to their last breath.

A Cumulative view of guidance

Keeping in mind the three distinct degrees of guidance, one can easily see that guidance is a thing which everyone does possess in some way, and yet no one, not even the greatest, can do without wishing to attain more of its advanced and higher stages. Hence, of all the prayers man can address to Allah, the most important is the prayer for guidance, which has been taught to us in the very first Sūrah of the Holy Qur'an; and this prayer is as necessary for the greatest of prophets and men of Allah as for an ordinary Muslim. That is why the Sūrah Al-Fath (Victory), in enumerating the material and spiritual benefits of the conquest of Makkah in the last days of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, also says: *وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَاطًا مُسْتَقِيمًا* (and to guide you on the straight path) (48:20). When these verses were revealed, the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم had already received guidance and was a source of guidance for others. The good tidings of receiving guidance can, in this situation, have only one meaning that he attained some very high station of guidance at the time.

Guidance: Some notes of caution

In concluding this discussion about the different implications of

6. As defined, it goes without saying, by the *Shari'ah* and not by individual or collective fancy, or by custom and habits, or by the fads or fashions of the day.

'guidance' (*Hidāyah*), we repeat points that would help the reader of the Holy Qur'an avoid certain confusions and errors:

1. The Holy Qur'an sometimes speaks of divine guidance as being general and common to believers and non-believers, in fact to all creatures, and sometimes makes it out to be particular and special to the God-fearing. So, the unwary may be led to sense a contradiction here. But once it is understood that one degree of guidance is common to all, whereas another degree is limited to particular cases, the doubt and confusion readily resolves itself.

2. On the one hand, the Holy Qur'an reminds us again and again that Allah does not grant guidance to the unjust and the unrighteous; on the other hand, it repeatedly declares that Allah guides all. The misunderstanding which may arise here is also dispelled by a knowledge of the degrees of guidance. Now we can easily see that the general guidance is given to all without any distinction, but the third and very special degree of guidance is not granted to the unjust and the unrighteous.

3. The first and the third degrees of guidance pertain to a direct act of divine grace, and no prophet can have anything to do with it, for the function of the prophets is related only to the second degree.

Whenever the Holy Qur'an speaks of Prophets عليهم السلام as guides, it is always referring to this second degree, and to it alone. On the other hand, when the Holy Qur'an, addressing the noble Prophet ﷺ, says: إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ (You cannot guide whom you please) (28:56), it is the third degree of guidance which is intended, that is to say, it is neither the function of a prophet nor is it in his power to provide *tawfiq* to anyone, in other words, to make it easy for anyone to accept guidance.⁷

7. Translator's Note: In this context one should not overlook the popularity enjoyed in the West, since the rise of Protestantism, by the notion of a personal relationship with God on the part of the individual. This notion has in its turn produced a diffused yet very effective conviction that ethics can be made independent of religion, that the external or legislative aspect of religion is of no account, that prescribed rites are irrelevant to the so-called 'religious experience', and more monstrously still, that doctrines can be dispensed with altogether -- all of which betrays a total incomprehension of what constitutes a religion. The tendency has, in fact, begun to infect some of the modernist interpreters of Islam in one way or another, all of whom claim to be fulfilling the 'needs of the present age'. Attempts have been made even to exploit this notion for ulterior motives.

To sum up, the Qur'anic prayer **إِهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ** (guide us in the straight path) is most comprehensive, and certainly, one of the most important prayers taught to man. No member of the human family can claim not to need it. No success, no prosperity in this or in the other world can really come without being on the straight path. Particularly so, for man lost in the anxieties of mortal life, the prayer for the straight path is an elixir, though people do not realize it.

Which 'path' is 'straight'?

Now, to come to the meaning of the 'straight path', it is the path which has no turns and twists. The term signifies the particular way of Faith which equally avoids the two extremes of excess and deficiency. One who follows the straight path would, in matters of doctrine and practice both, neither go beyond the limits nor fall short of them.

The last two verses of the Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah define and identify that 'straight path', something man has been prompted to pray for immediately earlier. The verse says: **صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ** (The path of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace). As to who these people are, another verse of the Holy Qur'an gives us details in the following words:

الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ

Those whom Allah has blessed, namely, the prophets, the *Siddiqin*, the *Shuhada'*, and the righteous. (4:69)

Continued

In persuading the Muslim countries to look upon themselves as 'the eastern-most part of the West', the London *ECONOMIST* argues that Islam 'also implies a one-to-one relationship between the believer and the God he believes in, a direct contact without intermediary and in this relationship, in which a single God speaks directly to the core of a single man, is the basis of individualism. The Protestant ethic is grounded on precisely the same concept.' (May 17-23, 1975, page 82 of the Special Survey).

In the light of the discussion regarding the three degrees of guidance, it should not be difficult to see that the direct contact with God without intermediary pertains only to the first and third degrees, and not the second degree where the mediation of the prophets is indispensable. To attain the third degree may be necessary for making a spiritual progress, but Islam, or for that matter any authentic religion, is born out of the second degree of guidance. One cannot, indeed, enjoy the benefits of the third degree without having accepted the guidance of the second degree -- or, to use the Islamic terminology, without following the *Shari'ah*.

These are the four categories of those who find favour with Allah. Among them all, the prophets are the greatest. The *Siddiqin* (the constantly true) are those who acquire spiritual perfection, and thus -- attain the highest rank among the followers of a prophet. In common parlance, they are called Men of Allah, or saints.⁸ The *Shuhadā'* (martyrs) are those who sacrifice even their lives for the sake of their faith (or, who bear witness to the truth, as the word admits of both meanings). The righteous (the *Salihin*) are those who follow the *Shari'ah* completely, not only in the matter of obligations (*Wajibat*) but also with regard to commendable (*mustahabb*) actions. In everyday language they are called the pious or the virtuous or the good.

This verse, then, determines the straight path in a positive manner, identifying it with the path followed by men of these four categories. The next verse, by a process of elimination, does the same in a negative manner by saying:

غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ۝

Not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.

Those who have incurred Allah's wrath are the people, who in spite of being quite familiar with the commandments of Allah wilfully go against them out of a calculated perversity or in the service of their desires, or, in other words, who are deficient in obeying divine injunctions. This, for example, was the general condition of the Jews who were ready to sacrifice their religion for the sake of a petty worldly gain, and used to insult and sometimes even to kill their prophets.

As for *الضَّالِّينَ* (those who go astray), they are the people who, out of ignorance or lack of thought, go beyond the limits appointed by Allah, and indulge in excess and exaggeration in religious matters. This, for example, has generally been the error of the Christians who exceeded the limits in their reverence for a prophet and turned him into a god. On the one hand, there is the rebelliousness of the Jews who not only refused to listen to the prophets of Allah but went on to kill them; on the other hand, there is the excessive zeal of the Christians who deified a prophet.

8. If taken in an untainted religious sense, and certainly not if taken in one of the many modern vulgarized usages of the term where, for instance, you see the halo of spiritual glory over the head of a spy!

Thus, the essential meaning of the verse is that, in praying for the straight path, we do not ask for the path of those who are the slaves of their desires, perverse in thought and action, and deficient in performing their religious obligations, nor the path of those who are ignorant or unmindful or misled, and indulge in excess and exaggeration in religious matters, but wish for a path between these two extremes, which inclines neither towards excess nor towards deficiency, and which is as free of the promptings of desires as of doubts and confusions and of erroneous beliefs.

In short, the prayer for the straight path is the essence of the Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah. Since knowing and following the straight path is the real knowledge and the real achievement in this mortal world, a mistake in picking it up right takes peoples and nations to ruins; otherwise, there are even non-Muslims who claim to be seeking God and undertake stupendous labours to attain this end. The Holy Qur'ān has, therefore, defined the straight path so explicitly from a positive as well as eliminative point of view.

The Key to the Straight Path

But, before we proceed, there is another problem to be considered, the answer to which would open the door to a new and more comprehensive understanding. It would seem that in order to define the straight path it should have been sufficient to call it 'the path of the Prophet' صلى الله عليه وسلم or 'the path of the Qur'ān', which should also have been more succinct and more explicit, for the whole of the Holy Qur'ān is really an explanation of the straight path, and the teachings of the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, an elaboration. But, setting aside the succinct and explicit form of expression, the Holy Qur'ān has taken up two verses of this short Sūrah for defining and delimiting the straight path positively and negatively, and has thus indicated that if one wishes to follow the straight path, one should seek such and such men 'those on whom Allah has bestowed His grace...', and adopt their way. Here, the Holy Qur'ān does not ask us to follow the 'path of the Qur'ān', for a book alone is not sufficient for the grooming of man; nor does it ask us to follow 'the path of the prophet', for the Holy Prophet ﷺ was not to be in this world for ever, and no other prophet was to come after him. So, in enumerating those whose teaching and example can help us attain the straight path, the Holy Qur'ān has, besides the prophets صلى الله عليه وسلم, included those too, who will always be found living amongst us till the last day of the world -- namely, the

Siddiqin, the *Shuhada'*, and the righteous.

For the purpose of indicating the manner in which one can find the straight path, the Holy Qur'an has thus referred not to a book but to certain men. According to a *ḥadīth*, when the Holy Prophet ﷺ informed his Companions that, like earlier communities, his '*Ummah*' too would be divided into seventy or seventy-two sects, and that only one among them would be on the right path, they wanted to know as to which group it would be. The answer he gave also leads on to certain men of Allah, for he said: مَا أَنَا عَلَيْهِ وَأَصْحَابِي (That which follows my way and the way of my Companions). All this comes to mean that written books or oral traditions alone cannot teach, train and discipline man; for this, one has to be with knowing men, and learning from them. In yet other words, the real teacher and groomer of man has to be another man; a book cannot take that place all by itself. How curtly this was pointed out by Akbar, the famous Urdu poet-humourist, who said:

کورس تو لفظ ہی سکھاتے ہیں
آدمی، آدمی بناتے ہیں

which, in English, comes close to saying: "Courses teach words. But, men train men." This truth holds good even for spheres of everyday life.

No one has ever become a doctor, or an engineer, or even a cook or a tailor merely by reading a book. Similarly, studying the Holy Qur'an and the *Ḥadīth* on one's own cannot by itself be sufficient for the moral-spiritual education and training of a man; such a study must be carried on under the guidance of a specialist or a genuine scholar before it can be useful. It is common observation that,⁹ many people today, though otherwise educated, cherish the erroneous notion that one can acquire a masterly knowledge of the Holy Qur'an and *Ḥadīth* merely by reading a translation or at best a commentary.¹⁰ But the error of such an enterprise is self-evident. Had a book in itself been sufficient for the guidance of men, there was no need for the prophets to be sent. But, Allah in sending us His Book, has also sent His Prophet to serve as a teacher and guide. In defining the straight path

9. Under the influence of the West, particularly that of Protestantism.

10. The illusion has been encouraged by the modernistic or pseudo-modernistic interpretations of Islam.

too, He has also enumerated those of His servants who find special favour with Him -- all of which argues that, in trying to understand the Book of Allah and to act upon it, one cannot solely rely on one's own study and judgment, but must turn to someone who knows.

The conclusion

Two things are necessary for the physical and spiritual well-being and success of man -- the Book of Allah which contains guidance for every sphere of human life, and the Men of Allah who help in making this guidance effective. The way to profit from the Men of Allah is to assess them according to the well-known principles of the Book of Allah. Those who do not conform to these principles should just not be regarded as Men of Allah. But, when one has found Men of Allah, in the real sense, one should seek their guidance in order to understand the meaning of the Book of Allah and act upon it.

Why the Schism?

As to the sectarian differences on this point, we may remark that there are two kinds of deviations in this respect. Some people elected to follow the Book of Allah alone, ignored the Men of Allah totally and gave no value to their teachings and explanations. Conversely, others adopted the Men of Allah as the only criterion of truth and became indifferent to the Book of Allah. Both these ways lead to fatal error.

Injunctions and related considerations

To recapitulate, the Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah begins with the praise of Allah. Then comes an affirmation on the part of man that he worships Allah alone, and turns to him alone in the hour of need. That is, so to say, the oath of allegiance man offers to his Lord and Master. Finally, there is a prayer which covers all possible human needs and goals. Beside these, there are some related secondary considerations also which arise from the Sūrah. These are as follows:

The proper way of Praying to Allah

Through this particular mode of expression and through its structure, the Sūrah teaches man how to pray and how to make a request to Allah. The proper method is that one should begin by fulfilling one's obligation to praise Allah. Then, one should offer the pledge of complete allegiance to Allah to the effect that one does not regard anyone except Allah as being worthy of adoration and worship,

nor does one look upon anyone except Allah as having the real power to give help in one's distress or need. Finally, one should pray for what one wishes to have. And there is every hope that a prayer made in this manner will be granted. (See Ahkam al-Jaṣṣāṣ). The Sūrah also suggests that, in praying to Allah, one should pray for something so comprehensive that it includes in essence all possible human goals, for example, pray for being guided in the straight path, because if one can and does follow the straight path in everything that concerns this world or the other, one's material life or spiritual, one need not be afraid of stumbling or of being hurt.

Praising Allah is Man's Natural Demand

The first verse of the Surah teaches man to praise Allah. We praise someone either for a quality inherent in him or for a favour received from him. But the verse mentions neither. The implication is that the blessings of Allah are limitless. The Holy Qur'ān says: **وَأِنْ تَعَدُّوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ لَا تُحْصَوْهَا** (If you try to count the blessings of Allah, you will never be able to number them) (14:34 and 16:18). Leaving aside other things, if man only considers his own being, he would find that it is a microcosm -- in itself which contains in analogical form everything contained in the macrocosm, his body offers a parallel to the earth, the hair on it to the vegetation, his bones to the hills, his veins flowing with blood to the springs underground.¹¹

Man, again, is composed of two parts, spirit and body, of which the spirit is obviously superior in value, while the body is subservient to it. In this inferior part alone, there are thousands of anatomical and biological wonders. There are supposed to be more than three hundred joints, but Allah has made each of them so strong that during the sixty or seventy years of an average man's life, they are in perpetual motion and yet do not need repairs. Of this Allah himself has reminded us:

11. It may not be out of place to remark that this analogical view of man's relationship with the universe has been an essential feature of all traditional cosmologies. The Copernican cosmology, whatever its merits may otherwise be, has tended to dissolve this vision of things, leaving man, at least in the West, to grow more and more alienated from the universe -- till we have arrived at the viewers of the American television who are reported to have been more interested in a ball game than in man's first landing on the moon -- Translator

نَحْنُ خَلَقْنَاهُمْ وَشَدَدْنَا أَسْرَهُمْ

It is We Who created them, and it is We Who endowed their joints with strength (76:28).

Or, take the example of the eye. One may spend a life-time and yet not fully know the manifestations of divine wisdom present in it. Or, take a single movement of the eye, and see how many blessings of Allah are involved in its functioning. Before the eye can see, internally it requires physical energy which in its turn is provided by food, air, water etc. And externally it requires the light of the sun which in its turn depends on a thousand other factors. That is to say, all the forces of the universe join together to make it possible for the eye to see even once. Now, try to calculate how many times does the eye see in a day, in a year, in a man's life-time. Similarly, the functions of the ears, the tongue, the hands and the feet, each brings into action the forces of the whole universe.

This is a kind of blessing which is equally available to every living man, be he a king or a beggar. In fact, all the greatest blessings of Allah are the common property of every living creature -- for example, air, water, light, the sun, the moon, the stars, in fact, everything that exists in the heavens and the earth, or between them, offers its benefits to all without distinction.

Then there are special blessings which divine wisdom has chosen to distribute unequally among men, some getting more and others less. This category includes wealth, honour, health, peace, knowledge and other acquisitions. Although the general blessings are obviously much more important and essential for human life than the special blessings, yet man in his naivete takes them for granted and never realizes what great gifts they are in spite of being common.

Now, human nature itself requires that in recognition of the innumerable blessings that keep descending on him at every moment of his life, man should, as far as he can, praise and continue to praise his Benefactor. It is to indicate this basic need of human nature that the Holy Qur'an employs the word **الْحَمْدُ** : 'Al-ḥamd' (Praise) as the first word of the very first Sūrah. Thus, the praise of Allah has been accorded a very high rank among the acts of worship. The Holy Prophet ﷺ has

said that when, on receiving some kind of a blessing from Allah, His servant says **اَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ**: (Praise belongs to Allah), it is like giving something better in return for what he has taken (Qurtubī, from Ibn Majah, as narrated by Anas رضى الله عنه). According to another *ḥadīth* if a man, on receiving all possible blessings of the world, says: **اَلْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ** (*Al-ḥamdulillāh*), his act is superior to all those blessings. Commenting on this *ḥadīth* and citing certain scholars, al-Qurtubī says, the ability to repeat the phrase '*Al-ḥamdulillāh*' with one's tongue is in itself a blessing of Allah. According to another authentic *ḥadīth*, saying this phrase fills half the scale on the side of good deeds in the Balance. As to what praising Allah should actually mean, Shaqiq ibn Ibrāhīm explains that when one receives some gift from Allah, one should first of all recognize the Benefactor, then be content with what He has given, and finally never disobey Him as long as one has some strength left in the body, which again is a gift from Allah. (See Qurtubī)

The second element in the phrase is *Lillah*, which is composed of the preposition *Lām* (Arabic equivalent of the letter L) and the noun 'Allah'. This preposition means 'for' and is used for particularization, showing the exclusive possession of a thing or quality. So, the phrase implies that not only is it the duty of man to praise Allah, but in reality all praise belongs exclusively to Him, and no one else in the universe is worthy of it. At the same time, and by way of a further blessing, Allah has, for the purpose of teaching man how to behave with his fellow beings, commanded him to thank those too through whom the gifts of Allah come to him, for one who does not see the need of thanking his human benefactor would not thank Allah too.

Self-Praise is not permitted

It is not permissible for a created being such as man to praise himself. The Holy Qur'ān says: **فَلَا تَزْكُرُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَىٰ** Do not pretend to be pure; He knows best who is really God-fearing (53:32). That is to say, a man can be praised only if he fears Allah, but Allah alone knows to what degree a particular man possesses this quality, known as *Taqwā*. As for Allah praising Himself, the reason is that man is not capable of praising the glory and greatness of Allah in a befitting manner. Not to speak of others, the Holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم has

exclaimed: لَا أُحْمِي نَاءَ عَلَيْكَ (I cannot properly praise You!). Therefore, Allah Himself has taught man the mode of praising Him.

Rabb is the exclusive attribute of Allah

The Arabic word '*Rabb*' (Lord) is applied to a person who not only possesses a certain thing, but is also fully capable of and responsible for nurturing it properly. Obviously, no one can act as '*Rabb*' with regard to the whole universe except Allah. So, the word, used in an absolute sense, is exclusive to Allah, and it is not permissible to address or describe anyone other than Allah as '*Rabb*.' A *ḥādīth* in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim explicitly forbids a slave or servant to call his master a '*Rabb*'. The word may, however, be employed in the case of a man too in a relative sense -- that is, in relation to a particular thing, for example, '*rabb al-dar*' (master of the house) etc. (Qurṭubī).

Seeking help from Allah

According to the great commentator and Companion 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās, the verse إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ : 'You alone we worship, and from You alone we seek help' means that one worships Allah alone and no one else, and that one turns for help to Allah alone and to no one else. (Ibn Abī Hatīm, Ibn Jarīr)

It has been reported from certain great scholars and saints of the earliest centuries of Islam that the Sūrah al-Fātiḥah is the secret (i.e., the gist) of the entire Holy Qur'ān, and this verse is the secret of the whole Sūrah, for the first sentence of the verse is a declaration of one's being free from *Shirk*, or from all desire to associate anyone with Allah, and the second sentence is an expression of one's being exempt from all wish to trust in one's own power and will. Such an affirmation would naturally lead to putting oneself in the hands of Allah in all concerns. The Holy Qur'ān again and again commands us to do so: فَاعْبُدْهُ قُلْ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ : 'Worship Him, and put your trust in Him'. (11:123); اٰمَنَّا بِهِ وَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا : 'Say He is the All-Merciful. We believe in Him, and we put all our trust in Him' (67:29); رَبِّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَاتَّخِذْهُ وَكِيلًا : 'He is the Lord of the East and the West; there is no god but He; so take Him for a guardian' (73:9). All these verses come to mean simply this -- a true Muslim should, in anything that he undertakes, rely neither on his own faculties nor on the help of a fellow creature, but should entrust himself completely to Allah, for He alone is All-Powerful, and He alone is the absolute helper.

Two doctrinal points emerge from this discussion. Firstly, it is totally forbidden to worship anyone except Allah, and associating anyone else with Him in worship is a deadly and unforgiveable sin. As we have already explained, *Ibādah* (worship) signifies an utmost humility and willing self-abasement before someone out of the deepest love and veneration. If one behaves in this manner in relation to any created being, it is called *shirk* (association) in Islamic terminology. It basically follows from this definition of "worship" that "association" does not merely consist in attributing divine power to figures made out of stone or metal as idolators usually do; but obeying or loving or venerating someone to the degree which is reserved for Allah is also an "obvious association" (*al-shirk al-Jalii*). In recounting how the Jews and the Christians indulge in *shirk* (association), the Holy Qur'an says: **إِن تَحْزَنُوا أَحْبَابَهُمْ وَرُحَبَاءَهُمْ أَزْكَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ** : 'They have taken their religious scholars and their monks as lords apart from Allah'. (9:31)

The Companion 'Adi Ibn Ḥatīm, who was a Christian before accepting Islam, asked the Holy Prophet ﷺ with reference to this verse as to why the Holy Qur'an should blame the Christians for having taken their religious scholars as lords when they were never guilty of worshipping them. The Holy Prophet ﷺ in his turn asked him if it was not a fact that their scholars had declared many things as forbidden although Allah had permitted men to eat them, and that conversely they had declared as permissible what had been forbidden, and that the Christians obeyed their scholars in both the respects. 'Adi admitted that it was so. Therefore, the Holy Prophet ﷺ remarked that this was exactly how they 'worshipped' their scholars. This goes to prove that Allah alone has the right to establish what is permissible and what is forbidden. If one associates somebody else with Allah in this respect and, in spite of being familiar with the divine injunctions regarding what is permissible (*ḥalāl*) and what is forbidden (*ḥaram*), goes against them, believing that someone other than Allah too can demand obedience in these matters, one is virtually worshipping him and being guilty of the sin of association (*shirk*). But, in order to guard against a possible misunderstanding, we may remark that this verse of the Holy Qur'an, which condemns the worship of religious scholars, does in no way apply to the generality of Muslims who, not being

qualified to understand the Holy Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* by themselves or to deduce the injunctions of the *Shari'ah* from them, naturally depend on an *Imām*, a *Mujtāhid*, a *Mufti* or a religious scholar and follow his instructions in these matters. In fact, such Muslims are only acting in accordance with the Holy Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*, and obeying divine commandments. For the Holy Qur'ān itself says:

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ۝

Ask the men of knowledge, if you yourselves do not know. (16:43)

Another thing which comes under the category of association (*shirk*) is to make votive offerings to someone other than Allah; so does praying to someone else in time of need or distress, for, according to a Tradition (*Hadīth*), praying is also an act of worship. Similarly, adopting such practices as are in general considered to be the signs or symbols of association also constitute the same sin. For example, the Companion 'Adī ibn Ḥatīm رضى الله عنه relates that when he embraced Islam and presented himself before the Holy Prophet ﷺ with a cross hanging round his neck, the Holy Prophet ﷺ asked him to remove this idol. Although at this time the cross did not have the kind of signification for 'Adī which it has for Christians, yet he was asked to shun a symbol of 'association' externally as well. Among the symbols of 'association' are included practices like bowing (*rukū'*) or prostrating (*sajdah*) oneself before anyone except Allah, or going round a person or thing in the prescribed manner of the *tawāf* (circumambulation) of the *Ka'bāh*. Avoiding all such symbols of 'association' is a necessary part of the pledge of fidelity to Allah made in the phrase: 'You alone we worship'.

Seeking Allah's Help Directly and Indirectly

The other doctrinal point we mentioned is that one must turn to Allah alone for help and to no one else. This requires some clarification.

There is a kind of help which every man does seek from other men. The physical aspect of the universal order being what it is, it has to be so, and not otherwise. A tailor or tinker, a carpenter or a blacksmith, each is serving others, and everyone is obliged to seek his help. Seeking help of this kind neither is nor can be forbidden by any

religion, for it is part and parcel of the network of physical means provided to men by Allah. In the sphere of non-physical means too, it is quite permissible for one to seek the help of a prophet or a saint by asking him to pray to Allah in one's behalf, or to mention, while praying directly to Allah, the name of a prophet or a saint by way of a medium (*wasilāh*) for drawing divine mercy upon oneself. Explicit Traditions (*aḥādīth*) and implicit indications of the Holy Qur'ān fully justify this practice, and it would be wrong to condemn it as being forbidden or to include it among the various forms of association (*shirk*).

Now, what sort of supplication for help is it which can be addressed exclusively to Allah and to no one else? And, when does one fall into the sin of *shirk* (association) in asking someone other than Allah for help? In reply to the second question, we may say that in this context the sin of *shirk* or association arises in two forms. Firstly, one becomes guilty of association, if one seeks the help of an angel or prophet or saint or any creature believing him to be omnipotent like Allah. It is such an obvious heresy that even idolaters and associators in general consider it as such, for even they do not look upon their idols and gods as being omnipotent like Allah. The second is the form adopted by idolaters and associators. They admit that God alone is Omnipotent, but also believe that He has delegated a part of His power to an angel or a prophet or a saint or to a smaller god who exercises a full and independent authority in that area, and to whom one may pray for help in matters within his jurisdiction. This is the supplication which the Holy Qur'ān forbids, and against which it warns us in the phrase *إِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ* (to You alone we pray for help).

There is a simple reason for misunderstanding in this regard. Allah appoints many angels to perform quite a large number of functions even in the physical order of the universe; or, He makes many things happen through the prophets which are beyond the powers of man and which are called miracles (*mu'jizat*), as also other incredible wonders through the saints which are called *karamat*. The appearance may easily lead a careless observer to ignore the reality, and to conclude from what he has seen that the angels or the prophets or the saints could not have worked such wonders if Allah had not

given them the necessary power and authority. This faulty argument which is no more than an illusion gives birth to the belief that the prophets or the saints enjoy absolute power and authority in their own degree. It is not so. Miracles and wonders are the direct acts of Allah, but they are manifested through prophets and saints so that people may recognize their spiritual station -- prophets and saints themselves have no powers to make such things happen. This fact is borne out by so many verses of the Holy Qur'an. For example, the verse: **وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ** : وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَى (8:17) 'When you threw, it was not you that threw, but Allah threw' (8:17) refers to a miracle of the Holy Prophet ﷺ in which he threw a handful of pebbles at an army of his enemies, and Allah willed it so that they smote the eyes of the whole army. The Holy Qur'an attributes the act of throwing pebbles, not to the Holy Prophet ﷺ but to Allah Himself, which clearly shows that a miracle is manifested through a prophet ﷺ, but is in reality an act of Allah Himself. Similarly, when the people of Nūḥ, or Noah عليه السلام demanded that, in order to establish his authenticity as a prophet, he should bring down on them the punishment and wrath of Allah, he replied: **إِنَّمَا يَأْتِيكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ إِنِّي** : **أَنَا** : 'Allah will certainly bring it down to you, if He so wills' (11:33), in other words, he declared that he himself could not bring down divine punishment on them by way of a miracle. Another verse of the Holy Qur'an reports what a group of prophets said to their people in reply to a similar demand: **مَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ نَأْتِيَكُمْ بِسُلْطَانٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ** : 'We cannot give you proof, except by Allah's will' (14:11). This again was an admission that it was not in their power to produce a miracle, for all power rests in the hands of Allah. In short, it is not at all possible for a prophet or a saint to show a miracle whenever he likes and whatsoever he likes. The disbelievers used to demand specific miracles from the Holy Prophet ﷺ and from the earlier prophets عليهم السلام but Allah manifested only those which He Himself pleased, and not others. The Holy Qur'an presents many such instances.

An ordinary example will make the discussion clear. In your room, you receive light from a lamp and air from a fan, but the lamp and the fan do not possess in themselves an absolute power to give you light and air, but need the electric current which they receive from the power house, and without which they cannot function. Giving you light

and air is, in actual fact, not the work of the lamp and the fan, but of the electric current which comes from the power house. Similarly, saints, prophets and angels, all depend on Allah in everything they do; it is Allah's power and will which makes things happen, though it manifests itself through prophets and saints as the electric current manifests itself through fans and lamps.

This example would also show that although prophets and saints have no power to make these things happen or come to be, yet their presence is not altogether irrelevant to what happens, you cannot have light and air in your room without there being a lamp and a fan. Likewise, you cannot have miracles or wonders without there being a prophet or a saint. There is, of course, a certain difference between the two situations. In spite of all the wirings and fittings being intact, you cannot have light without a lamp, nor air without a fan. But, in the case of miracles, Allah has the power, if He so wills, to manifest them even without the medium of prophets and saints. The usual way of Allah has, however, been that miracles are not manifested without the medium of prophets and saints; otherwise miracles would not serve the purpose for which they are intended.

To conclude, one must have firm faith in the doctrine that everything that happens is made to happen by the power and will of Allah, but it is also necessary to recognize the need for prophets and saints, and to admit their importance. Without such an admission, one would succeed neither in obeying divine commandments in the real sense nor in attaining Allah's pleasure exactly like the man who, being ignorant of the worth of lamps and fans, disregards them, and remains deprived of light and air.

The problems we have discussed above perplex many a mind. But the answer is essentially simple. Taking prophets and saints as a medium (*wasilāh*) for drawing divine mercy upon oneself is neither absolutely permissible nor absolutely forbidden. There is a condition attached to it. If one does so, believing a prophet or a saint to be all-powerful, it becomes an act of *shirk* (association) and is hence forbidden. But if one takes a prophet or a saint to be no more than a medium or a means, it is permissible. But one finds that in this matter people generally adopt either of the two extreme positions, outright

rejection of *wasilāh* or exaggerated veneration. The truth, however, lies between the two.

6. Success in this world and in the Hereafter

As we have said before, the prayer which the Holy Qur'ān has chosen to recommend to everyone, in every situation and for everything one does, is the prayer for being guided in the straight path. Just as success in the Hereafter depends on taking the straight path which leads one to Paradise, in the same way, if you come to think about it, success in all worldly concerns too depends on keeping to the straight path -- that is, on using the means and methods which habitually lead to the attainment of one's goal. Conversely, a little reflection will reveal that failure is always due to having strayed from the straight path. In view of the need for the straight path in worldly and other worldly concerns both, this is the prayer which should constantly be on the lips and in the heart of a true Muslim -- never as an empty verbal exercise, but with a sincere intention and with the meaning of the words fully present in the mind.

With Allah's help, the commentary on Sūrah Al-Fātiḥah ends here.

